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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SAN SALVADOR 000315

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ES](#) [ELECTIONS](#)

SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: FIVE WEEKS FROM ELECTION, ARENA LEAD
NARROWS

REF: A. 2005 SAN SALVADOR 2507

[1](#)B. 2005 SAN SALVADOR 3215

[1](#)C. SAN SALVADOR 210

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Latest polls indicate that the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) retains the lead in both mayoral and Legislative Assembly races, but its lead over the opposition Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) has narrowed slightly. There is no indication thus far that this will be a continuing trend. Large numbers of Salvadorans report their intent to vote, but many have still not settled on their local candidates. Nearly 47 percent of voters do not think their vote will affect local problems. Indications are that ARENA may win additional Legislative Assembly seats, although probably not the desired 43 seats that would give them a simple majority vote. This polling was conducted before the recent death of FMLN leader Schafik Handal, which may cause slight shifts in voting intentions (see reftel C). Saca's private pollster and his Mexican political strategist (protect) told Polcouns last week that they would consider it a real setback if ARENA were to capture any fewer than 39 Assembly seats. These strategists said that their numbers thus far show that ARENA could win 41 seats or more, strictly on Saca's highly-popular coattails. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (SBU) The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) presently holds 29 of the Legislative Assembly's 84 seats, with the usually-dependable support of its center-right National Conciliation Party (PCN) allies' 14 deputies. Legislation requiring a 43-vote simple majority is more or less a matter of routine business. Although the (FMLN dissident) Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR) failed to receive official status as an independent party in time to offer its own slate (reftel B), they have formed a coalition with the Democratic Center (CD) and the Christian Popular Social Party (PPSC; a Christian Democratic Party/PDC breakaway group). The coalition currently holds 14 seats with which ARENA and PCN must negotiate legislation requiring a two-thirds (56 vote) supermajority, such as the assumption of external debt necessitated by approval of the federal budget or constitutional reforms. ARENA and the PCN now hold, respectively, 109 and 53 of the nation's 262 municipalities, including seven large cities. The FMLN's 71 municipalities include Santa Ana (municipal capital of Santa Ana department) and all of greater San Salvador, except for the ARENA-ruled suburb of Antiguo Cuscatlan.

Polls show slight dip in intention to vote for ARENA

[1](#)3. (SBU) A poll performed January 14-22 by leading daily La Prensa Grafica involved 2,000 interviews nationwide with persons above the age of 18. ARENA retains the lead in both mayoral and Legislative Assembly races, but may have lost ground slightly. In November, 27.7 percent of the population indicated an intent to vote for ARENA for mayor, whereas now 25.9 percent of the population intends to vote for ARENA. Similarly, in November, 28.7 percent of the population intended to vote for ARENA for Legislative Assembly deputy, but the latest poll shows 26.6 percent with intent to vote ARENA. Conversely, the FMLN has made some gains, from 11.6 to 15.1 percent for mayoral races, and from 12.5 to 17.2 percent for Legislative Assembly seats. ARENA candidates continue to hold leads throughout the country in both mayoral and Legislative Assembly races, but margins are narrower in the eastern zone and San Salvador metropolitan area. Voters in San Miguel (departmental capital of San Miguel department) indicate a very strong preference for the PCN, and, in Santa Ana, for the PDC. (Note: San Miguel Mayor Will Salgado was previously elected on the ARENA ticket prior to his defection to the PCN. End note.)

[1](#)4. (SBU) Large numbers of Salvadorans (78 percent) indicate an intent to vote, but many have still not decided for whom they wish to vote (25.9 percent for mayoral candidates, and 27.2 percent for Legislative Assembly candidates). Many Salvadorans also declined to inform pollsters of their preferences for candidates (20 percent for mayoral

candidates, and 19.6 percent for Legislative Assembly candidates). Approximately 47 percent of voters do not think that their vote will result in solutions to their local problems.

Candidate important--but unknown

15. (SBU) According to 57.8 percent of the population, the individual candidate is what most influences their voting preference. However, when asked to name their local Legislative Assembly members, an overwhelming majority (77.6 percent) couldn't name a single Legislative Assembly representative for their area. Only 3.7 percent could name all of their representatives; 17.1 percent could name some but not all deputies. When asked to name a Legislative Assembly member from each party who had performed well in office, approximately 4 out of 5 Salvadorans didn't name anyone. This varied little by party, with the PDC's Rodolfo Parker receiving the highest rating at 2.8 percent. The now-deceased Schafik Handal rated second highest with 2.5 percent.

Criminal concern

16. (SBU) At just over 40 percent each, crime and economics virtually tied as the number-one overall concern of those interviewed. When asked what specific crime problems concerned them, 27 percent stated delinquency, and 11.9 percent stated gangs. Economic issues of concern were more diverse, with 12.7 percent of respondents citing unemployment, 11.9 stating the economy, and 8.5 percent stating poverty. When asked about local issues of concern, infrastructure problems took the forefront, with lack of water and bad streets topping the list (10.8 and 10.0, respectively). Crime was identified as the second most important problem, with delinquency and gangs being the number one and two answers given in the category of security (9.8 and 6.1 respectively).

17. (C) COMMENT: The most recent polling data was collected before the January 24 death of longtime FMLN leader Schafik Handal, which could cause slight shifts in voting patterns in some races (see reftel C). Handal's death may provide a temporary rallying point for FMLN hardliners recently hard-pressed in finding issues of resonance to voters, although any such phenomenon applies only to FMLN strongholds, and in any event may be too short-lived to affect the election significantly. The big prize in this election continues to be the San Salvador vote, where 25 Legislative Assembly seats will be decided. The fight for those seats is being waged by the highly popular Tony Saca (rather than the weak ARENA candidate) against the FMLN political machinery, which has controlled San Salvador and its metropolitan area since the 1997 elections.

Barclay